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# The World of the Eighth-Century Prophets

RICK R. MARRS

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The world of the prophets is unfamiliar terrain for many readers of the Bible. Contemporary readers, if they read the prophets at all, often envision them primarily as ancient voices heralding the coming of the Messiah. The sociohistorical context from which those ancient pronouncements derive receives little attention. Such lack of attention is unfortunate because much of the message escapes serious study. The power and continuing relevance of these ancient words from God go unheard.

The eighth century B.C. represents one of the most fascinating and dynamic periods in the history of ancient Israel. The Old Testament provides a plethora of materials from this period, documenting its importance in the life of God and his people. Although centuries removed from us, Israel of the eighth century B.C. offers striking analogies for the 21st-century church. To appreciate fully those similarities, some knowledge of the sociohistorical world of the eighth century is imperative.

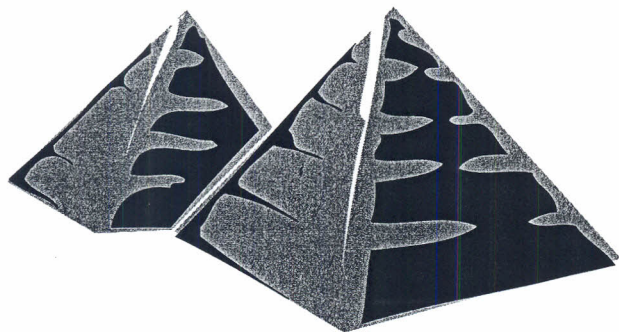
We have a wealth of resources to reconstruct the history of the eighth century B.C. The archaeological record for this period is impressive. Extensive excavations have been conducted at numerous sites in Israel and Syria. We also possess valued literary remains of various types. As historiographic resources, we have not only the accounts of 2 Kgs 14-20 (parallel passage: 2 Chr 22-32) but also a parallel version of the siege of Jerusalem in Isa 36-39 and significant Assyrian annals.<sup>1</sup> Although more difficult for use in reconstructing history, we also have significant (nonhistoriographic) resources in the prophetic books themselves.<sup>2</sup>

We divide the eighth century B.C. initially into two halves. The first half of the century largely reflects a period of Assyrian weakness. Although Assyria had been a dominant force in the region for years, with the death of Adad-nirari III (782 B.C.) Assyria fell into decline. Simply put, whenever the suzerain of the world was preoccupied with domestic matters, the vassals (for our interests, Syria, Israel, Judah, and Philistia) ignored the yoke of servitude and sought opportunities to exploit the situation (typically through land acquisition and military expansion). Such was the case for the bulk of the first half of the eighth century B.C.

During this period, a powerful figure came to the throne in northern Israel. Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.)

effectively exploited internal Assyrian weakness. He extended the borders of Israel ("from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of Arabah [2 Kgs 14:25]),<sup>3</sup> engaged in significant military expansion of border forts and armories, and transformed the socioeconomic system.<sup>4</sup> Archaeological remains document the prosperity of the period.<sup>5</sup> Excavations throughout north Israel show splendid and expansive buildings, buildings possessing costly imported goods.<sup>6</sup>

However, this socioeconomic boom carried tragic consequences. If we accept the prophetic records as reliable witnesses to the period, we real-





ize that the prosperity was not equally distributed. Rather, this period saw the rise of a wealthy merchant class, a class enriched at the expense of the poor! As one small sector of Israelites grew richer, a major sector became increasingly impoverished. Intriguingly, the death of Jeroboam II roughly coincides with the reemergence of Assyria.<sup>7</sup>

However, in 745 B.C., the landscape of the ancient Near East changed dramatically. To the Assyrian throne came Tiglath-Pileser III (Pulu [745-727]). After securing the home front, he began engaging in systematic military campaigns to reestablish strict Assyrian control of outlying vassals. Calling himself “king of the world,” he reorganized the Assyrian government,<sup>8</sup> taking direct control of military personnel and operations. Perhaps most importantly, Tiglath-Pileser III instituted two programs that had dramatic consequences for Syria-Palestine. On one hand, he philosophically adhered to the military policy, “walk loudly, carry a big stick, and use it whenever necessary.” Assyrian military action during this period

was notoriously ferocious and vicious. Enemies received brutal treatment at the hands of the Assyrian war machine. This policy was intended to sow terror in the hearts of potential opponents. On the other hand, Tiglath-Pileser III implemented a policy of exiling and relocating survivors. The Assyrians were effective, killing only as many as necessary to achieve victory. The survivors were exiled to new geographical locales.<sup>9</sup>

The second half of the eighth century B.C. is even more relevant for our study of the prophets. By 740 B.C., Assyria had secured the Mediterranean coastline. However, in 734-732 B.C., Tiglath-Pileser III marched into Syria and northern Israel to squelch a potential revolt. Amazingly, Tiglath-Pileser III entered the fray at the invitation of a Judean king! In the early years of the 730s, the kings of Syria (Rezin) and Israel (Pekah) formed a coalition. Although historically bitter border foes, Israel and Syria apparently felt a coalition of their forces could withstand an Assyrian threat. To fortify further their military position, these two kings attempted to “muscle” the king of Judah (Ahaz) to join their coalition. The records suggest that Ahaz saw himself in a no-win situation. From his perspective, if he joined the coalition, Assyria would kill him.<sup>10</sup> If he refused to join, these two northern kings would assassinate him. Desperate, Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help, voluntarily offering allegiance to the Assyrian crown!<sup>11</sup> Tiglath-Pileser III marched into Syria-Palestine, and after extensive fighting, defeated the combined forces of Syria and Israel. Damascus was toppled; a significant number of captives were removed from north Israel (primarily Galilee and Gilead).<sup>12</sup> The glory days of Jeroboam II were long past as historical reality; however, dreams often die hard.

This war, known as the Syro-Ephramitic War, saw the death of King Pekah of Israel, the complete collapse of Syria, and the fall of the northernmost sectors of Israel. To the throne of Israel came the pro-Assyrian Hoshea (734-724 B.C.).<sup>13</sup> Though initially loyal to Assyria, Hoshea’s allegiance waned at the end of his reign. He joined company with Egypt and revolted in 724 B.C.<sup>14</sup> The successor to Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) marched against Israel and besieged the northern capital, Samaria. By 722 B.C., Samaria had fallen.<sup>15</sup> The Assyrian practice of exiling survivors changed the northern landscape forever. A significant segment<sup>16</sup> of the northern population was removed to the east (primarily the regions of

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Habor and Gozan); inhabitants from Babylon, Hamath, and Cuthah were brought into the vacated land.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps of equal importance was the migration (flight) of numerous Israelites south to Judah.<sup>18</sup>

With Syria and north Israel gone, only the tiny kingdom of Judah remained. Ahaz had survived years earlier through a pledge of allegiance to Assyria. His successor, Hezekiah, attempted to reverse Ahaz's pro-Assyrian policies; he implemented a religious reform throughout the southern country.<sup>19</sup> According to the biblical writers, Hezekiah reversed the idolatrous practices of his father Ahaz. He removed several Assyrian cultic symbols and the bronze serpent (Nehushtan) from the Mosaic era that had become problematic religiously (see 2 Kgs 18:4). Hezekiah, critiqued as a "righteous king" by the biblical writers, apparently raised hopes sufficiently among his Judean subjects that talk of a return to the glorious Davidic era surfaced. Religious zeal joined forces with national pride. This resulted in a return of Assyrian presence into the region.

Sargon II campaigned along the Philistine coast in 711 B.C., taking control of Ashdod and its environs.<sup>20</sup> However, in 701 B.C., a new Assyrian king, Sennacherib (705-681), marched across the Judean countryside, torching 46 cities in his path. In 701 B.C. he besieged Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> The account is recorded in 2 Kgs 18-20 (parallel passage of Isaiah 36-39) and the annals of Sennacherib.<sup>22</sup>

Attempts to reconstruct the exact details and chronological proceedings of the period encounter numerous difficulties. The following rendering represents merely one plausible scenario. While engaged at Lachish, Sennacherib sent ahead a military delegation to secure surrender from Jerusalem. The conversation between the Assyrian delegation and the Jerusalem leaders reflects customary Assyrian military intimidation.<sup>23</sup> Although Hezekiah apparently paid tribute,<sup>24</sup> his subsequent actions (viz., consorting with Egyptian personnel) caused Sennacherib to march against Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> In 701, Jerusalem lay under heavy siege; her destruction seemed inevitable. However, at the height of this most tenuous moment, a plague swept through the Assyrian camp, killing thousands of soldiers.<sup>26</sup>

Almost overnight, Sennacherib broke camp and headed home! Jerusalem had been miraculously spared! The deliverance of Jerusalem would loom large in the minds and hearts of the Judeans throughout the next century. This event would provide powerful testimony to the theological dogma of the inviolability of Zion.

The importance of the events of 701 cannot be overestimated. Significant portions of Isaiah's oracles must be read against this backdrop. A century later, the prophet Jeremiah would encounter incredible opposition to his message that the fall of Jerusalem was imminent. To be overly simplistic, his opponents countered that Jeremiah was wrong theologically (he was denying the heart of the David/Zion theology) and that the events of 701 provided prime testimony against any notion that God would ever let Jerusalem fall.

With the lifted siege and deliverance of Jerusalem, the eighth century B.C. came to a close. In the following century, Judah would play out a historical scenario somewhat similar to her northern sister Israel. The results would be equally tragic. Jerusalem would fall (586 B.C.), and life for God's people would never be the same.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Isa 36-39 specifically parallels 2 Kgs 18-20. From the Assyrian annals we have inscriptions from Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, and Sennacherib. Somewhat more removed chronologically are the later records of the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) and the Jewish historian Josephus (first century A.D.).
- 2 Utilizing nonhistoriographic literary remains to reconstruct history involves numerous difficulties. If one is not careful, the reconstruction becomes circular: i.e., the literary remains are used to reconstruct a historical scenario; that reconstructed historical scenario is then used to interpret other literary (e.g., prophetic) materials. Nonetheless, the books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah remain invaluable resources for developing a sociohistorical vision of this period.



- 3 This territorial designation is the footprint for Solomon's territorial rule (1 Kgs 8:65).
- 4 One can plausibly argue that during the eighth century Israel migrated largely from a rural, agrarian-based economy to an urban, mercantile economy.
- 5 This period of economic boom and territorial growth is mirrored in Judah on a smaller scale. Uzziah (Azariah [783-742]) enjoyed a similar power and prosperity. Like Jeroboam, he carried out large-scale building programs (2 Chr 26:6-15). He also took control of Edomite lands and consolidated the southern trade routes. He rebuilt the port city of Ezion-Geber (Elath) and penetrated deep into the Philistine plain. Near the end of his reign, he suffered from leprosy. In the year of his death, Isaiah experienced his vision of Yahweh (Isa 6).
- 6 Ivory inlays of Phoenician or Damascene origin appear throughout the remains.
- 7 Following Jeroboam II, Israel experienced political turmoil and instability. Zechariah, son of Jeroboam II, lasted six months before being assassinated. His successor, Shallum, lasted only one month (2 Kgs 15:13-16)! Menahem fared better, reigning for seven years (745-738). Although opposed by Pekah, Menahem apparently bought political security by paying tribute to Assyria. The irony is that Menahem exacted this tribute money from those merchants who had prospered during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 15:20).
- 8 Tiglath-Pileser III implemented a three-stage system in foreign policy. Based on their obedience/disobedience to the Assyrian crown, vassals were given either relative freedom and flexibility in domestic matters, or micromanaged through on-site Assyrian military intervention.
- 9 Two qualifiers merit comment. First, exiling was not comprehensive. Only those survivors who were perceived as a threat to the Assyrian empire—and who could generate income in the slave market—were exiled. Second, relocating captives was premised on the notion that dislocated peoples are more easily managed.
- 10 The siege placed against Ahaz was not for the purpose of war but for the purpose of deposing him. The coalition kings were threatening to install another (pliant) king (the "son of Tabeel") in his place.
- 11 This is the historical backdrop for much of Isa 7-11. In this situation, the prophet Isaiah counseled Ahaz to "trust God," advice Ahaz clearly found politically and militarily inexpedient!
- 12 It has been plausibly suggested that northern Israel was divided politically during this period between pro-Assyrian and anti-Assyrian advocates. The strongest concentration of anti-Assyrian sentiment may have been localized in these northernmost sections of Israel.
- 13 The Assyrian annals claim that Tiglath-Pileser III appointed Hoshea king. Hoshea paid tribute to the next Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V.
- 14 During the latter half of the eighth century, a policy pattern toward Assyria emerges. With each transition in Assyrian kingship, Israel or Judah would discontinue allegiance. Not surprisingly, the Assyrian response would be swift and ferocious.
- 15 Apparently, Shalmaneser V died a few weeks before the fall of Samaria. His successor, Sargon II, took credit for the victory.
- 16 The Assyrian annals list the number of the deportees at 27,290.
- 17 Because all Israelites were not exiled (deportation typically involved the upper classes), over time this geographical relocation resulted in a hybrid people in north Israel; these people were *eventually* designated Samaritans. The Assyrians renamed the province Samerina. Sargon rebuilt Samaria, humbly claiming he made it better than before.
- 18 Although the archaeological data is somewhat controverted, reasonable estimates suggest that the population of Jerusalem and its surrounding environs certainly doubled, if not tripled, during the aftermath of the fall of Samaria.
- 19 The chronological scheme for this period of Judean history is incredibly complex. The synchronization between the reigns of the north Israel kings and their Judean counterparts almost defies resolution. It is especially difficult to determine the precise date for the transition from Ahaz to Hezekiah. (The reign of Hezekiah is variously given as 715-687/6 or 727-698.) The religious critique of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah is telling. Ahaz receives a thoroughly negative evaluation. He willingly entered into alliance with Assyria, paid heavy tribute, and seemingly allowed Assyrian religious presence in the land. In contrast, Hezekiah receives high praise for his attempts to reform the country religiously. Historically, Judah survived the Assyrian threat during the reign of Ahaz but suffered extensive loss during Hezekiah's reign (though Jerusalem was spared annihilation).
- 20 See Isa 20.
- 21 We have significant and diverse archaeological data for this most climactic event in the life of Judah. We have palace panels from Lachish, depicting the advance of the Assyrian army across the countryside. Hezekiah apparently dug a tunnel from the Gihon spring to Siloam to secure water for Jerusalem in the likely event of a siege. (The Siloam inscription documents the accomplishment.) The Taylor Prism records Sennacherib's version of the events. According to the Assyrian annals, the campaign ended in a complete victory for Assyria.
- 22 Sennacherib's account merits repeating: "As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth-ramps, and battering-rams brought thus near to the walls combined with the attack by foot soldiers, using mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out of them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered them booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage ... Thus I reduced his country ... Hezekiah himself, whom the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship had overwhelmed and whose irregular and elite troops which he had brought into Jerusalem, his royal residence, in order to strengthen it, had deserted him, did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city ... (J. Pritchard [ed.], *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969], 287-88). The Rassam Cylinder claims Hezekiah sent 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver (plus extensive other valuables) to Nineveh.
- 23 Specifically, the Rabshakeh talks of "trust" (*bkh*), a term customary in Assyrian treaty conversations.

- 24 2 Kgs 18:14-16; interestingly, this payment is omitted in Isa 36-39.
- 25 The biblical account suggests a connection (military?) with an Ethiopian king, Tirhakah. Historically, Tirhakah ruled Egypt from ca. 690-664 B.C. This has led scholars to posit numerous historical reconstructions. Some argue that the biblical record telescopes two Assyrian campaigns against Jerusalem into one scene. Others retain one campaign but with two stages. A simple solution (though lacking in textual evidence) makes Tirhakah *commander* of the Egyptian forces in 701 B.C., who later becomes *king* in 690 B.C. For a complete discussion of this period, consult the standard histories of Israel.
- 26 Numerous reasons have been given for the abrupt departure of Sennacherib. Some argue he received Judean tribute, which accomplished his mission. Others argue he received news of unrest (a possible coup) in Nineveh. (Sennacherib is assassinated by one of his sons about 20 years later.) Although numerous scholars at one time dismissed the biblical attestation of a death angel devastating the Assyrian camp as pious legend, several details make this reading quite plausible historically. Although Sennacherib certainly does not attribute his troubles to Yahweh, his annals do intimate he returned to Nineveh to address difficulties in the capital city. Strikingly, Sennacherib gives undue attention in his palace reliefs to the sack of Lachish, suggesting that Jerusalem (a far more important trophy) escaped him. Perhaps most significantly, Sennacherib's famous claim that he "shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage," may speak volumes about his failure! Given the penchant of Assyrian royalty to describe in extensive and graphic detail their destruction and annihilation of enemy kings, Sennacherib's claim may implicitly provide testimony that his ultimate goal to destroy that most important Judean city, Jerusalem, ended in failure! The numbers mentioned by both sides seem daunting. Sennacherib claims he took 200,150 captives, an incredibly high count. Conversely, an Assyrian carnage of 185,000 soldiers may reflect the need for textual emendation (with a minor switch in letters, the number becomes 5,180!).

